



Sport in a Divided Northern Ireland: Past and Present

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SPORT IN A DIVIDED NORTHERN IRELAND

Past and present

David Hassan

Introduction

It is a universal truism that when politicians fail to agree and division becomes manifest that the effects of such discord are witnessed across civic society and impact upon the everyday lives of its citizens. Nowhere is this truer than in Northern Ireland, a country synonymous with internal conflict, violence and mistrust between its two major ethnic groupings, Irish nationalists and Ulster unionists (McEvoy 2008). The country is one part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland but its positioning, adjacent to the Republic of Ireland, offers a clue as to the social, political and cultural issues at the heart of a long-standing dispute, underwritten in many cases by thinly veiled sectarianism (at other times this is tragically manifest), that led to a violent guerrilla-style conflict between Irish republican paramilitaries, loyalist factions (Unionist paramilitaries) and functionaries of the British state, specifically the locally based police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), which began in the late 1960s (Bew 2007).

This violence grew out of a frustration being experienced by ordinary Catholics in Northern Ireland at that time who felt that a Unionist-dominated government in Northern Ireland treated them in a discriminatory fashion and, inspired by a global civil rights movement that was taking hold then, took to the streets to vent their frustration. From there events spiralled out of control and, sensing an opportunity to revisit an unrelenting desire for the re-unification of Ireland (between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland), which had been established following the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, republican paramilitaries waged a war against their pan-Unionist opponents that only reached an agreed cessation with the signing of the Belfast Agreement in 1998 (Ó Dochartaigh 2004). This simultaneously brought an end to widespread violence in Northern Ireland, introduced a broad policy of demilitarisation and established a power-sharing executive in the country that allowed proportionate representation for different shades of political opinion there and which became acceptable to most (if not all) sides (Bew 2007).

That said, it would be incredibly naïve to expect a sophisticated network of subversive paramilitary activity simply to cease as if somehow bringing down the shutters on a defunct shop front. As recently as late 2015, the devolved executive sitting at Stormont was placed in jeopardy following the murders of two former IRA volunteers in the Markets and Short Strand

areas of Belfast respectively, the second of which was widely believed to have been carried out by members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), which had officially been stood down in 2005. As Sinn Féin had been the political wing of the IRA and had approved the organisation's commitment to non-violence, a precursor to engagement in the locally formed power-sharing executive, the future of the executive remained in the balance even within sight of the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the Good Friday Agreement.

At the heart of much of this dispute was the issue of national identity and even those for whom expressions of allegiance were a secondary consideration, perhaps because they did not experience the sense of loss that conflict can exercise upon a people, were almost obliged to adopt a partisan stance. Indeed, in this case, some (albeit a minority) had to effectively acquaint themselves with markers of ethnic identity in Northern Ireland so as to variously deploy these in the company of like-minded individuals or, perhaps more commonly, use this knowledge to orientate themselves around uncomfortable social situations when in the company of the 'other side'. Social class was not the only means by which people could sidestep many of the problems that beset Northern Ireland over the course of the last three decades (and more) of the twentieth century. In reality it was only certain parts of the country that experienced the full effects of the conflict, which meant that other regions (despite its modest size) of Northern Ireland escaped relatively unscathed. Those who lived in rural parts of North Antrim, South Down, North Derry and West Tyrone appeared to go about their lives in a manner largely untouched by events that they otherwise consumed through their televisions and radios. Of course there were some terrible atrocities in these districts as well, but they were comparatively few and far between and, as these parts were similarly bereft of the presence of security forces, it was possible to live out one's life there in a benign form of relative isolation (McVeigh 1994).

Thus, as this chapter will make clear, many of the unresolved issues that remain in Northern Ireland are not exclusively political in form but in fact have more to do with cultural identity and expression, such as the flying of certain flags and establishing an agreed narrative concerning the country's divided past to permit its telling in a public forum. In recognising this, it should not be overlooked that many of these cultural markers are of course underwritten by political symbolism and meaning. Activities such as the flying of flags and banners, the playing of certain songs, not to mention participation in certain sports remain ostensibly cultural acts but they retain defined political meanings as well, the exact degree of which is dependent upon a host of historical and contextual factors peculiar to the setting in which they are being performed. Alongside this a range of other agencies have attempted to play their part, many again operating outside established political structures, focusing instead on popular expressions of identity promoted through sport, cultural pastimes and other similar pursuits (Bairner 2002). In so doing they recognise the need to respect cultural differences, in relation to such matters as membership of social organisations and clubs. As in all societies, individuals and groups pursue entirely legitimate forms of cultural expression in Northern Ireland, even if these carry particular weight in such divided settings where they constitute both a form of political allegiance 'by proxy' and are an important aspect of community expression for many, including those who feel disenfranchised from wider society (Boyd 2001; Brewer and Higgins 1998).

As such, despite the signing of the aforementioned Belfast Good Friday Agreement in 1998 and a wide range of significant developments in the peace process since then, Northern Ireland remains a polarised society. Nearly half of all council wards in Northern Ireland (47 per cent) have a population that is over two-thirds Catholic or Protestant, and the vast majority of children and young people (92.6 per cent) attend schools that are segregated on the basis

of religion. These deep divisions are also evident in the realm of sport and the close relationship between sport and national identity in Northern Ireland is, by now, well established. However, this picture is more complicated than some commentators suggest and while sport undoubtedly reflects social divisions, it also has the capacity to cross these boundaries and contribute to social cohesion.

Nevertheless it is perhaps not surprising that of all available forms of cultural expression, sport has often been the site where the underlying community divisions that historically have existed in Northern Ireland have found a hostile public expression, taking such forms as verbal sectarian abuse, the chanting of songs designed to demonise 'the other' and, occasionally, spectator violence between supporters of clubs aligned with competing ethnic traditions (Bairner and Darby 1999). In addition, some sports continue to be perceived as being associated with one part of Northern Ireland's community only, so that Gaelic games (such as hurling and Gaelic football) are still thought to be for Catholics and nationalists, while games originating in the main from Britain (such as hockey and rugby) are broadly understood as being solely for Protestants and unionists (Bairner 1999). That being said, there is some 'shifting of the sands' around the edges of this historical analysis in recent times, largely the result of social class issues, for example, the sporadic interest in rugby union shown by the growing Catholic middle classes as a legitimate expression of their comparative wellbeing and general *bonhomie*.

That is not to say that any attempt to straddle the issue of divided identities in Northern Ireland (to ride two horses, to use an appropriate sporting metaphor) is an entirely pain-free process. In September 2012, Rory McElroy, by then the World's Number 1 golfer, was asked whether he would wish to play for Team GB or Ireland when golf is played at the Summer Olympics in Rio 2016 for the first time. In response McElroy recognised that he owed the Golf Union of Ireland a great debt of gratitude for its support in his early career development but remarked 'I've always felt more British than Irish. Maybe it was the way I was brought up, I don't know, but I have always felt more of a connection with the UK than with Ireland' (RTE online, 12 September 2012). The crucial phrase here is 'the way I was brought up', as for McElroy, a Catholic from North Down, the decision should have been straightforward in the apparently dichotomised world of contested identities in Northern Ireland. He was Catholic, which means he sees himself as exclusively Irish and thus, wanting nothing to do with Team GB, would choose instead to declare for Ireland. But McElroy's prevarication on the issue (he would eventually declare for Ireland in 2014 to considerably less fanfare) suggests that there are other factors at play in shaping individual identities through sport, such as the locale in which people grow up, their exposure to members of the 'other side' and, again, their social class.

Instead we must return to the major team sports in Northern Ireland to gain a more accurate understanding of the current state of community relations, as evident through the prism of sport, in the country. Indeed, in the face of periodic violent outbursts at, and in the vicinity of, its matches and conscious that, all too often, sport does present the most obvious expression of ethnic division in any country, the major sporting bodies in Northern Ireland, namely the Irish Football Association (IFA), the Ulster Council of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and the Ulster Branch of the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU), began to assume a wider community development role following the historic political settlement of 1998 and, virtually in unison, launched a series of outreach activities aimed at encouraging those who might have traditionally pursued other sporting interests to become acquainted with theirs (Boyd 2001). It is of course admirable, even ambitious, work and, as will be made clear, it is possible to point to meaningful developments from this well-intentioned endeavour and to where positive

outcomes have been realised. However is it not equally timely to suggest that significantly more should have been achieved by the major sporting bodies in Northern Ireland around advancing the cause of 'good relations' in the country almost two decades after the signing of the Belfast Agreement? Specifically, on the key markers of sporting division in the country – Catholic support for the Northern Ireland football team, Protestant engagement with Gaelic games and working-class involvement in rugby union – whilst there have been undoubtedly some useful, if largely ephemeral, initiatives undertaken, precisely how impactful these have been over the long term remains unproven.

Thus whilst key stakeholders, including the various sporting organisations, have invested considerable time and resources in this area over recent years and there are perhaps some indications that certain cross-community sporting schemes and initiatives have had positive outcomes, work still remains to be done. Put simply, without broad agreement about the aims and objectives, and in the absence of a set of benchmarks against which to evaluate these, it is difficult to measure the success of these initiatives with any confidence. For example, while the 2013 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey module on 'Sport and Social Exclusion' produced some interesting results, these are open to a raft of competing interpretations. The fact that 38 per cent of Protestant respondents expressed a willingness to attend a GAA match at Casement Park, Belfast (compared to 78 per cent of Catholics), could either be viewed as a cause for concern or as evidence of the first steps to progress. However, set against the figures for a willingness to attend an Ulster Rugby match at the Kingspan Stadium, Ravenhill (67 per cent of Protestants and 70 per cent of Catholics), these results appear more perturbing. By contrast, the fact that relatively few Protestant respondents (16 per cent) disagreed with the statement that 'I would like to see more Protestants playing Gaelic Sports' suggests a softening of attitudes towards the GAA on the part of that community. The limitations of the social attitude surveys are also evident here, however, and the significance of this apparent shift might be called into question if actual membership and participation rates remain polarised along ethno-sectarian lines.

In fact, one of the main challenges for researchers is the lack of clarity around what constitutes 'success' or 'progress' in this area and the existence of different perspectives among stakeholders. Moreover, although the concept of cross-community sport is multi-faceted, many of the nuances between the different levels of involvement in sporting activity are glossed over. For example, the strategies designed to increase the proportion of children from a Protestant background playing Gaelic games are likely to be very different to those aimed at tackling anti-social behaviour in interface areas in Belfast or of increasing the number of Protestant spectators at GAA inter-county games. However these are often grouped together under the general umbrella of cross-community sport with little consideration of the differential implications for the individual and society.

Thus to adequately grasp the changing nature of the interplay between sport and politics amongst Northern Ireland's foremost participatory sports, there follows an overview of these throughout the remaining part of this chapter. This is designed to illustrate the genesis of their link to forms of political activity and, more optimistically, how this process has evolved and ultimately changed for the better (in some cases) as the country begins to move beyond its troubled past to a more settled and tolerant future. To begin with, the focus turns to the game of association football or soccer. Despite the apparent omnipotence of the indigenous Gaelic sports in Ireland as a whole, in Northern Ireland soccer still retains a strong hold on the sporting interests of that society, not least because members of the majority Unionist community rarely frequent Gaelic games or have any particular interest in them. It is with a close examination of soccer therefore that this focused overview begins.

Association football

The founding of association football in Ireland was, for the most part, a Unionist project, which in every way sought to locate its cultural epicentre in the Protestant-dominated northern part of the island (Garnham 2004). Yet this did little to quell interest in the game on the part of Irish nationalists who, albeit sceptically at first, gradually started to take a firm interest in the sport, even in the face of the growing strength of the indigenous GAA, which often spoke in grave tones about how fraternising with soccer folk somehow constituted a form of Irish cultural heresy (Hassan 2002). Over time, and especially in urban areas such as Belfast, Dublin, Cork and Derry, soccer became extremely popular for many nationalists, who played and attended matches alongside others, including the majority Unionist population, in Northern Ireland. In the latter case, however, difficulty arose for some as all forms of popular pursuits in the country, including sport, became appropriated by one side or the other, that is by either Irish nationalists or Ulster unionists. Within the space of less than a decade, from the mid-1980s until the early 1990s, playing soccer, supporting certain teams and the relationship between politics and sport in Northern Ireland changed irrevocably (Cronin 1999). Whereas young Catholic boys ran through the streets of Derry, Belfast, Armagh and Newry recounting imaginary commentary of their part in Northern Ireland's relative triumphs at the 1982 and 1986 FIFA World Cup finals, by now adolescents they began acquainting themselves instead with a series of relative unknowns, born and brought up in England, Scotland and Wales, who, as a result of a generous interpretation of eligibility criteria on the part of the Football Association of Ireland (FAI), had managed to find themselves playing for the Republic of Ireland and, under their new English manager, the 1966 World Cup winner, Jack Charlton, appeared to be sweeping all before them (Cronin 1999). Compared with the sombre, stale, sectarian soccer-scape of Northern Ireland, the excitement surrounding the Republic of Ireland national team was much too attractive for nationalist fans north of the border to ignore (McGee and Bairner 2011). More significant, however, is the fact that in subsequent years, a growing number of players born in Northern Ireland have opted to represent the Republic of Ireland. Not all nationalists in Northern Ireland made this most unusual of international transfers. Some have retained what once appeared to be an unbreakable bond of allegiance to 'the north' as if informed by the very sense of loyalty that goes to the core of football fandom itself (Hassan *et al.* 2009). However, issues of identity were transformed with the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, which formalises the right of Northern Irish citizens to align themselves to the national identity of their choice. In a number of instances, this has encouraged young footballers to refuse to play for Northern Ireland representative teams, with perceived discrimination and exclusion of the part of IFA coaches and officials and the continued use of the British national anthem at Northern Ireland games being cited as significant factors (McGee and Bairner 2011). It is for this reason, and in light of many more apparent contradictions, that soccer, possibly more than most other cultural pastimes and certainly more than any other sport in Northern Ireland, sheds light into the dark crevasses of nationalist ambitions, both culturally and politically. As such, the late 1980s were a turning point in football allegiances for northern nationalists and almost three decades hence, battle lines established back then show little sign of abating (Bairner 2013).

Expressed differently, despite Northern Ireland being an altogether changed place from the ravages of the 1970s and 1980s, most Catholics and seemingly all nationalists, show little sign of supporting the country's international football team so long as the Republic of Ireland remains comparatively vibrant, progressive and altogether more inclusive – to their minds at least. Little consideration is given to the fact that the Republic of Ireland team, in some ways

at least, only represents 26 of the 32 counties in Ireland and thus is as partitioned – in an Irish Republican sense – as the team taking to the field in the colours of Northern Ireland. To quote an interviewee the author encountered in the late 1990s when researching this subject, '26 is as bad as 6' in terms of how soccer reflected the aspirations of at least some Irish nationalists in 'the north'. Instead they point to the fact that Martin O'Neill, from south Derry, a Catholic and former manager of Celtic FC (a Scottish football club with Irish and Republican connections), and thus someone with impeccable credentials for the job, is the current manager of the Republic of Ireland team. The fact that he is a former captain of Northern Ireland, representing the country in two World Cup tournaments, is only interpreted as further proof – if this was indeed required – of a justification for their actions.

Whilst a discussion of how soccer reflects the divided identities of sports fans in Northern Ireland may appear perfectly logical, what of the activities of the GAA? It is tempting to conclude that the GAA remains the most obvious example of a homogenised, all-island sporting form on account of its underpinning ideology and guiding principles. However, such analysis is too simplistic and instead the Irish identity evident in Northern Ireland and displayed through the auspices of the GAA, is markedly different to that revealed by their contemporaries in the Republic of Ireland.

GAA: a united organisation

Simply put, the approach taken by the GAA is such that it regards its legitimate presence across the 32 counties of Ireland to be unfettered by the presence of a legal boundary demarcating 6 counties in the north-east of the island, as they remain part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, from the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland. By not officially recognising the legitimate presence of Northern Ireland, or at least not doing so for much of its long history as reference to its existence is by now widely accepted by GAA members and officials, the association sought to advance the myth that the way the organisation is experienced, and the views held by its members on a range of policy issues, remains common across both parts of the island. This is patently not the case and plenty of evidence exists to support this thesis, from differing attitudes on the part of representatives in Northern Ireland towards the removal of Rule 21, which until its repeal in 2001 had prevented members of the British police and army presence in Ireland from becoming members of the association, and also the playing of sports other than Gaelic games at GAA grounds (Rule 42). That the GAA would be different in Northern Ireland compared to the Republic of Ireland is not a surprise and would even be widely understood and appreciated by its membership. Yet a reluctance to fully embrace this reality has implications for the role the GAA performs in a divided Northern Ireland, in relations between its members on either side of the political divide on the island and upon its supposed role in assisting a latent push towards the reunification of Ireland.

The simple fact is that the majority of Protestants in Northern Ireland do not understand the GAA, consider it an almost exclusively Catholic organisation and one with an unhealthy degree of sympathy for the cause of Irish republicanism. The Ulster Council of the GAA, based in Armagh, Northern Ireland, has been engaged in very positive outreach work with its counterparts in other sporting bodies and with schoolchildren from the state sector (i.e. Protestant and Unionist). But this work only appears to be having a limited impact, as breaking down long-standing barriers, maintained by a cocktail of truth, misperceptions and myths, is an onerous undertaking, which will take considerably more time and effort to deliver upon.

Boxing

As has already been suggested in this chapter, plying one's trade as a professional sportsman in the 1980s in Northern Ireland was far from a straightforward undertaking. Sport could not escape the ethno-sectarian divide that so defined the country and any attempt to subvert the established dichotomy between nationalists and unionists appeared naive at best (Sugden 1996). If anything, one risked the wrath of one's own community by becoming overly acquiescent with 'the other side' so most athletes, teams and governing bodies of sport engaged in an endless round of self-justification, of listing unresolved grievances and generally keeping their distance for risk of alienating their own constituency. Yet individual athletes appeared to be able, at least in part, to remain outside this unseemly process and receive the support of a representative sample of both Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. One such individual was the boxer Barry McGuigan, who, on a famous night at Loftus Road, the home of Queens Park Rangers Football Club, in 1985 claimed the World Featherweight championship to the unbridled joy of his legions of followers. What set McGuigan apart were his deliberate attempts to position himself as a representative of all the people of Northern Ireland, and indeed of Ireland as a whole for he was after all born and brought up in County Monaghan, on the southern side of the Irish border (Hassan 2005). Few athletes, including boxers, had attempted to make a virtue out of their cross-community support and McGuigan was by no means the most high-profile athlete to emerge from Ulster. The Pentathlete Dame Mary Peters had, of course, claimed Olympic Gold in Munich in 1972 whilst during the same era George Best was celebrated worldwide for his achievements on and indeed off the football field. Thus there was something significant about the man himself, but also the sport, that allowed McGuigan to occupy a role that was part sportsman, part peace campaigner, and whose often-quoted plea 'Leave the fighting to McGuigan' remained an honourable, if not particularly impactful, plea amid a Northern Ireland torn asunder by internal strife (Hassan 2005).

Nevertheless McGuigan's capacity to set himself apart from the sports-politics nexus in Northern Ireland, to command a genuine cross-community following and to reject symbols and anthems that could be interpreted as divisive was a brave and worthy crusade, all the more so when understood in the context of his sporting heroism. After I wrote an article on McGuigan, in an edition of the journal *Sport in History* (2005), the response of those who read it only confirmed the special standing enjoyed by McGuigan amongst sports fans worldwide. I received correspondence from boxing fans in many remote parts of the globe, including those who had heard about the piece but hadn't been able to read it. Then one day I returned to my office after teaching a class of undergraduates to be met by a voicemail message from McGuigan himself who had read the article and wanted to express his gratitude to me for penning it. Shortly after, a signed copy of the opening page of the article arrived in the mail from McGuigan and now adorns a wall in my office. Almost three decades after McGuigan was carried shoulder high through the then-divided streets of Belfast his legacy still lives on in the minds of many sports fans in Ireland, and indeed amongst the boxing fraternity worldwide.

It is almost poetic therefore that McGuigan would play such a telling role in the rise of the Belfast boxer Carl Frampton who, by 2014, had become the IBF World Super Bantamweight champion. Frampton's ascent to global boxing stardom reflects a lot of the experiences of McGuigan himself. Both men form one half of so-called 'mixed marriages', a remarkably dated term meaning they are married to women who come from the opposing religious persuasion to them. In addition, like McGuigan before him, Frampton is keen to promote cross-community support for his work and remains impressively adept at communicating this in his

public interviews and through his broader civic engagement across Northern Ireland. He is, in many ways, a modern incarnation of his mentor McGuigan. What distinguishes Frampton of course is that he grew up in Tiger's Bay, a staunchly loyalist part of north Belfast, while his wife Christine, a criminology graduate, was raised in Poleglass, a republican estate on the western fringe of the city.

Sporting infrastructure

Whilst McGuigan (and now Frampton) managed to at least bring to the fore some debate about the potential unifying capacity of sport in a divided society, the reality is that much about this realm only exacerbates and consolidates separation, as opposed to helping ameliorate it (Bairner 2001). In this regard sports stadia, with all their associated resonance, their imbued meanings and exclusionary infrastructure, constitute very real examples of division in Northern Ireland. Earlier the dilemma facing many Irish nationalists in Northern Ireland around which international team to support on the island of Ireland – the Republic of Ireland or Northern Ireland – was outlined. A large part of the stated resistance of northern nationalists to engage with football in Northern Ireland, to play for the team but mostly to support it, is due to the Unionist iconography associated with Windsor Park, the ground where Northern Ireland plays its home games (Hassan 2002). Simply put, many nationalists interpret the atmosphere at Windsor Park to be unwelcoming for them and thus they choose to stay away.

Of course other events in the troubled history of Northern Ireland have also played a role in this process. In 1994, the murder of six civilians in the Heights Bar, Loughinisland, a village previously largely untouched by the Troubles, during the Republic of Ireland versus Italy World Cup group game in the U.S., struck at the very heart of the interplay of sport, politics and division in the country. As local men and women had congregated in the public bar to watch the game – all residents of the small County Down village – the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), a loyalist paramilitary grouping, entered shooting randomly at those gathered in front of the television screens viewing the match. As those present were assumed to be Catholics supporting the Republic of Ireland, an act viewed by some within the loyalist community as somehow indicative of a broader antipathy towards Northern Ireland, they were considered a 'soft target' by loyalist terror groups intent on sending out a much wider message about the future of Northern Ireland and, in particular, its status within the United Kingdom.

Unionists, of all shades, are being increasingly encouraged to consider engaging with the GAA in Northern Ireland, while the Ulster Council of the GAA for its part is pursuing an on-going courtship of Unionist politicians so as to convey a sense of openness to the Unionist people as a whole. Whereas such work is of course long and often arduous in nature, albeit certainly better than doing nothing, quite what has been achieved from well over a decade of endeavour in the broad field of 'sport and good relations' in Northern Ireland remains unproven. Maybe this is ultimately because the major governing bodies of sport in Northern Ireland, rugby union, GAA and association football, continue to play their games in relative isolation (Sugden and Harvie 1995).

When the British government announced in early 2004 that it believed a multi-sport stadium was financially viable most observers interpreted this as meaning that should the authorities governing GAA, football and rugby union in Ulster come to some accommodation regarding ground sharing, and this proposal gain the backing of the devolved Northern Ireland Assembly, that the UK Exchequer would not be found wanting in providing the finance necessary to build a new, and much needed, sports stadium. It was, to use an appropriate euphemism, something of an 'open goal' (Hassan 2006). The machinations of what happened next are far too complex

to recount here but suffice to say the stadium was not built; the funding was reallocated to each of the aforementioned sports that, at the time of writing, are engaged in various stages of reconstruction of their existing, partitionist and thus ultimately exclusive stadia. Therefore a form of sporting apartheid remains in Northern Ireland for all but a small upwardly mobile, culturally inquisitive elite who may well oscillate between Belfast's Ravenhill and Casement Park, between the sports of rugby and GAA, even if Windsor Park, with its dated, dark and increasingly historic sporting past, continues to be a step too far for most.

The 'new' Irish

The internal conflict in Northern Ireland occupied the attention of those near and far in such a way as to largely overlook the growing numbers of people born outside the British Isles who gradually began arriving there. Understandably this number could initially be categorised in the hundreds (or even fewer) but certainly after some degree of acceptable 'peace' took hold in Northern Ireland and the borders of the European Union expanded, many new arrivals made Ireland, north and south, their home. Immigrants are themselves a disparate collective, with some coming to Ireland to find work, to relocate for family reasons, or because they are refugees or asylum seekers. Regardless of the precise reason underlying their relocation to Ireland most immigrants are keen to secure employment, settle into a normal way of life and contribute to the communities in which they now reside. Yet all too often their story is markedly different from this idyll as some are subject of racism, discrimination of a variety of forms and experience subsequent isolation (Garner 2004). It is a regrettable, if all too predictable, response in a world seemingly incapable of accepting the outworking of global migration and resettlement.

Again sport can be a useful tool in helping to integrate new arrivals into a country, if handled appropriately. In Northern Ireland an enlightened approach adopted by the Irish Football Association meant that those people, initially males but more recently females as well, who were new to Belfast and had an interest in football could join a team, whose purpose was only partly the winning of soccer matches. Instead the club, entitled World United FC, constituted a useful information and advice centre for those seeking employment, a safe and welcoming place to live and the type of support network any person arriving from overseas could benefit from. The success of World United, which has been recognised by UEFA as a programme worthy of wider dissemination, is itself a statement about the evolving nature of sport and society in Northern Ireland (Hassan and McCue 2013).

The same could be said of the situation in the Republic of Ireland, which is mercifully free of the legacy of inter-ethnic violence that has so besmirched Northern Ireland, yet nonetheless remains a conservative and largely insular nation-state. Here however it seems the real challenge is around finding accommodation with a significant minority of talented young men, some of whom are refugees and asylum seekers, on the part of those who govern association football in the Republic of Ireland (FAI) and appear reticent to actively pursue citizenship on behalf of some of these young immigrants. Certain organisations, such as the grassroots body Sport against Racism Ireland, have sought to draw attention to this issue not least as they recognise the very important role sport can play in helping to alleviate the concerns and fears some 'new arrivals' have about settling into a new locale (Hassan and McCue 2013).

What consideration of this development ultimately achieves is to track the evolution of life and sport in Ireland, especially Northern Ireland, over the past 40 years. Whereas sport began as a convenient means of demarcating 'us' from 'them', it now also serves to highlight the changing nature of society in Northern Ireland and the many benefits such plurality can provide in a society that is otherwise sadly bound by myopia and latent political self-interest.

The future

All of which brings the situation in Northern Ireland up to the present day with some degree of optimism that a better future may yet unfold in the years ahead. There is some evidence of a cultural thawing in the country with sport again seemingly leading the way. Unionist politicians, who previously studiously avoided any reference to the work of the GAA, are now enthusiastically attending Gaelic football matches, speaking in praiseworthy tones about its community relations work and generally proving wholly receptive to its overtures. Likewise, Sinn Féin ministers in the Northern Ireland Executive, including the Deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness, are now publically attending matches at Windsor Park, including games featuring Northern Ireland. All the while there appears to be a very profitable working relationship being established between the three major sporting bodies in the country that now seem capable of negotiating a fine line between continuing to serve their own constituencies without unduly alienating others who otherwise approach their activities with caution.

At the same time a growing sense of 'Northern Irishness' appears to be making a resurgence, and this is communicated variously from certain sections of society there. Thus, having reached the apparent depths of despair during the late 1980s in Northern Ireland a critical examination of sport in the country might actually contain the seeds of an altogether more peaceful future. Historically, sportsmen and women have become embroiled, for better or worse, in the politics of identity in Northern Ireland but as the political situation there appears finally to have found some common ground it is little surprise that sport too is gradually moving to reflect this uneasy peace. In another decade or more it is a distinct possibility, perhaps remarkably so, that sport may contribute to an even more normalised society and that the divisions of the past may be confined, where arguably they should always have been, to the annals of history.

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